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The Twilight of the Gods

And

The Religion of the Dawn

AN ADDRESS

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The minister of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis is granted absolute freedom of thought and of speech. The Sunday morning addresses are the expression of his individual convictions and he alone is responsible for them.

This address is printed because it sets forth the growth and development of the idea of God, as that idea has kept pace with man's knowledge, giving the impression of theism which is pretty generally held by Unitarians, namely: that the "Great Reality" is beyond the ability of man to define, and that all conceptions of deity thus far have been very inadequate creations of the human mind.

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The Twilight of the Gods and the Religion of the Dawn.

I want this morning, under the subject "The Twilight of the Gods," to present some wandering thoughts on the idea of God, especially as related to the evolution or growth of that idea. And what I have to say in the beginning centers around a thought which has been very clearly expressed by the philosopher, Fichte. He said: "Every concept of God is necessarily that of an idol." The philosopher of course was not referring to graven images; but to mental images, to thoughts and ideas of God. And of these he affirms that they are all, by necessity, idols; that is, they are not God itself. They represent a figure of God to the mind, to the mind's eye as we say, just as a carved image represents a figure to the physical eye. Take an example. A well known passage in the New Testament compares Deity to a potter—a potter shaping man out of clay according to his will. Now this is a concept of God; but every one realizes at once that it is a kind of idol, for although you may compare Deity to a potter, Deity is not a potter. It is not a person who sets out to make things out of pre-existing matter according to a pattern. Or take a still more familiar example. The Christian conception of God is that of a father—a father who looks after his children and cares for them. That also is a concept of God; but again we see that it is a kind of idol, for though you may compare Deity to a father, Deity is not a father. It is not a person who gives material and moral support to men, as does a father to his children.

What we have here in both instances is a metaphor. But human concepts of Deity have advanced through any

number of metaphors and myths, and it is thus that in the incomparable lines of Shelley

> "Life, like a dome of many colored glass,
> Stains the white radiance of eternity."

Matthew Arnold schooled his generation well in the fact that the word "god" was a literary or poetic expression applied to an object of consciousness which the speaker or writer was not able to make clear to himself. It was not a term of science. It did not stand for a perfectly definite and ascertained idea from which we might extract propositions and draw inferences. Now we recognize our great debt to Arnold. We do not pretend to be completely scientific, though we do try to be perfectly rational. God is for most of us, I think, just the sum and highest expression of personal life and love. Intellectually God is nothing more than the great inference, by which we attempt to explain certain inexplicable phenomena. Honesty compels us to put it as low as that. But to the spiritual apprehension God is the great fact, the great reality, far more powerful than the Creator, King, Father, Love, which are imperfect symbols of it—which are, in fact, only idols of the real God.

A Continual Idol-Breaking.

Now, if we try to look back through the long avenue of myths and metaphors through which the human spirit has traveled to broader and clearer conceptions of God, we shall see that the process is little other than a continual making and breaking of idols. The human mind constructs a certain image of deity—it may be an Egyptian cat, or a Hebrew golden bull, it may be the Imperial patron of the Roman Empire, or the Christian father of all men. But after a time the mind outgrows the image, throws it away, and fashions one in accordance with its better knowledge. Thus the gods of history are seen successively disappearing—first into the twilight, then into midnight.

In his terrible poem, from the title of which I have borrowed the title of this address, Heine, the German poet, puts this fact of man's spiritual advance into barbaric imagery. He pictures a vast, primeval brood of all-defying giants, swinging flaming torches in their hands, fixing iron ladders to the skies, and madly storming the citadel of heaven. They smash the stars to dust, tear the golden

curtain from God's own tent, hurl their blazing brands through all the firmament, and scourge the angels, who utter piercing cries while

"Upon his throne God sits, pale, ashy pale;
Plucks from his head the diadem, and tears his hair."

While this all sounds very terrible, we need not deplore the process, nor need we deny it. It is inevitable and necessary. Look back over the history of religion. The gods of the old world are seen emerging from chaos, struggling for recognition, passing on to their noontide of popularity and general worship, then fading into the twilight as new gods are seen rising over the dawn of man's intellectual horizon and finally disappearing into eternal darkness to make room for the still newer gods which in their turn shall follow them. For the successive gods are not God, but only idols—not the Eternal itself, but figures fashioned in the workshop of the human mind.

A Defense of Atheism.

And here I wish to enter a defense of a much abused class of men. Orthodoxy has no harder word to fling at a reformer of the gods than the word "atheist." But really what is an atheist? He is a thinking being who, as the result of advanced knowledge, has come to disbelieve in the old gods. He is a man to whom the popular gods assume the aspect of idols, who therefore discards them, declines to worship them and thereby gets himself poisoned or burned or crucified. The pagan Socrates was poisoned for the crime of atheism because he disbelieved in the civic gods of Athens, not because he disbelieved in God. The early Christians were flung to the lions as atheists because they disbelieved in the national gods of Rome, not because they denied the existence of Deity. Hypatia was torn to pieces by a Christian mob as an atheist because she disbelieved in the gods of the early Christians, though she never denied the existence of God. Giordono Bruno was burned at the stake as an atheist because he disbelieved in the god of the medieval Christian Church, though he was firm in his belief of God. Michael Servetus was roasted into blackness as an atheist because he disbelieved in the god of John Calvin, though he believed thoroughly in the god of Servetus.

Now, what free religion such as we practise here advocates is this: Let every one be free to form his own conception of God, and if he confesses his inability to form any conception at all of the Infinite, well, he is free to form no conception at all and is considered no less worthy. Let us be admonished by the fallen gods which are strewn all along the pathway of human thought. Let us recognize the temporary necessity of what seems to be a

negative declaration termed atheism, and let us have sympathy with the numerous bands of reformers falsely stigmatized as atheists. Atheism is usually nothing more than iconoclasm. It is the protest of knowledge and sincerity against some ignorant and dishonest form of theism. It is the utterance of unfaith in those grim and immoral idols of the people which are utterly unworthy of faith. The so-called atheist therefore has frequently been the pioneer to a truer theism. He is usually one who discards the popular conceptions of God in the interest of a higher and nobler conception of God. And how after all can definitions really help us? What after all are names but symbols? And what, think you, cares the Infinite about names? The fact is that the progressive advance in our idea of God keeps pace with the progress of our other knowledge. And they are wisest who attempt no definition of the undefinable, being of Herrick's opinion that

"God is above the sphere of our esteem,
And is the best known, not defining him."

A Defense of Theism.

After that defense of the atheist I may be permitted to enter a defense of the theist also. And I will take theism at a pretty low down stage and venture for it a word of sympathy and tolerance. Take that form of theism expressed by the lumbering word "anthropomorphism;" that is, the error of conceiving God in the form of man; like the "magnified, non-natural man" Matthew Arnold poked such fun at. I may express it more popularly by a verse prefixed by Jack London to one of his tales:

"As any one is, so is his God,
And thus is God oft strangely odd."

I may describe this much laughed at theism by a parable which was told by the late Professor Sabatier. The Monk Serapion, a man full of zeal and piety, fell into the error of the anthropomorphist. The Bible was full of anthropomorphic expressions which he took literally. One day there called upon him with the view of converting him from his error, the Priest Paphnutius and the Deacon Photinus, who explained to him that God, being spirit, could have no material body or outward form or organs of sense. The pious Serapion declared himself convinced, partly by their arguments and partly by their Catholic authority; and all present rose up to praise God for his having renounced the awful heresy, for bringing so holy a monk to the pure faith. But in the midst of their praises the unhappy old man fell to the ground sobbing and crying because the image of the God to whom he had been accus-

tomed to address his prayers had vanished from his heart —"Woe to me, unhappy, they have taken away my God and now I have no one whom I can grasp and I do not know whom I am to adore and pray to." There is something both pathetic and ridiculous about the plight of this poor old monk. One hates to take from men the only idea of God which they are able to grasp, yet childish ideas are not attractive when they outlast childhood. And though modern Serapions are quite numerous, and we may sympathize with them, we must not permit them to fix the standard of truth, or set the pace for progress. Rather must we agree with the bold spirit formerly known by the pen name of Saladin, when he exclaims: "Yes, if in the reading of the riddle of the universe we must postulate deity, let us have God expressive of the ripest knowledge, the loftiest aspiration, the most transcendental spiritual vision of modern humanity; not the coarse and barbarous eidolon of credulous and unlettered savages. In respect for our intelligence, in mercy upon our feelings, give us God up-to-date."

Science Destroys Superstition.

Saladin's longing for a God up-to-date leads me to go a step farther. Not only do I put up an apology in behalf of such idolaters of mental images as Serapion, but I make bold to say that religious superstition is largely due to defective science, and that the people who hold such superstition therefore are not to blame. When there was no real science superstition was inevitable. In medieval days supernaturalism was as natural as in the scientific world today a denial of it is natural. When men did not know their universe they naturally peopled it with ghosts and goblins, demons and devils, lords many, and gods many. When science is down superstition is up, and when science is up superstition is down. Religion is not to blame, nor is science; but simply the general condition of human knowledge. Making the best of its small knowledge the theology of the supernatural professed to know much about God. I say "professed" because we have learned through our scientific study of the universe that their supposed knowledge about God was not true; but the advanced thinker of today may spare his smiles at the supernaturalism of the Middle Ages. Theology could do no better until science had given it an evolutionary and orderly conception of the universe instead of a miraculous and disorderly one. The universe being conceived as it was, the only kind of God that theology could logically formulate was an absentee, personal being who could have no union or communion with the things and creatures he had made, and who could come to them only on occasions of great

necessity by miraculous intervention, miraculous revelation, miraculous mediators, and miraculous whatnot. Hence arose the whole system of miraculous religion and supernatural theology.

The Dawnlight in Man.

A genuine, fervid, spiritual, yet intellectual and scientific conception of the infinite and eternal reality of this universe has become possible only with the arrival of the evolutionary view of existence. Men now recognize God, not by the gaps in their knowledge but by the fullness of their knowledge; not by the disorder in the universe, but by the order of the universe; not by the comings and goings of Deity, but by the continuance of its presence. Did you ever stop long enough to realize that miraculous religion is a kind of atheistic religion? For if God appears only occasionally he must be absent generally. Therefore, we are shut up to the choice of no-god or all-god. And the intellectual theism of today makes its choice of the perpetual presence, the abiding intelligence, and has no use for miracles and revelations. It accepts the law of the divine unfolding in nature which excludes the necessity for special miracle, and the divine life in the soul which excludes the necessity for special revelation. It does not think of man as a kind of nestling fallen to the earth and waiting helplessly until the high god stoops down and lifts him up to salvation and heaven; but as the nursling of the eternal spirit of the universe which lives and loves and saves by the power within man himself. Man's spiritual nature implies a spiritual environment with which it can correspond, and, says the modern theist, there is no better name for that environment than God.

We thus come upon the startling fact that the twilight of the gods is caused by the dawnlight in man. As mankind advances toward perfection he becomes aware of imperfections in the deities of the old order. It is thus that ignorance contains the seeds of its own decay. Whatever gods are unable to keep up with the intellectual and moral march of men must recede into twilight, and then midnight, and finally pass back to chaos or to Hades, as the old mythologies told. Mark this point well—the twilight of the gods was accompanied by, nay, was owing to, the dawnlight of mankind. Just as to the spectator of a sunrise of the far north, the light that fades in the west and the light that grows in the east appear to mingle and broaden out into a boundless day, which includes the glories of the old in the greater brightness of the new, so do the funeral lamps of the dead gods mix their beams with the day-star of the gods new-born, thus imparting a greater splendor to the religion of the dawn.

God Destroys the Gods.

The thought which I want to develop next in line with this is summed up in an old medieval saying, the truth of which may not strike you at first glance: "No one is against God but God himself." That is, the death of the old gods and the birth of the new are each and equally due to the real God itself. No human being can put the old gods to death—that is the work of God itself, of God in the garb of time and knowledge and wisdom and growth. Neither can any human being bring the new gods to birth—that also is the act of God itself, God in the guise of destiny and opportunity and necessity and the fullness of time. Wonderfully and strictly true therefore is that mighty paradox of the Middle Ages—"No one is against God but God himself."

Let me then try to show you how religion always comes to us as the religion of the dawn. By a little exercise of historic imagination, we realize that the entire past and present are linked together as one continuous process of evolution. The new is continually coming to light, the old continually passing into the dark. Only fools pour scorn on the decayed altars of the human race. None but the fools of the future will pour scorn on ours. With Wordsworth,

> "Great God, I'd rather be
> A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
> So might I stand on this present lea,
> Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
> Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea,
> Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn."

If we realize that human history is one continuous story, of which no chapter really contradicts another, we shall have universal sympathy, and be true disciples of the universal religion. The sanctities of every soul and the sanctuaries of every race will be sacred to us. All are but rounds of the ladder on which earth is gradually ascending to heaven. To get the true perspective let us turn our gaze back to the very dawn of dawns, to the very beginning of conscious religion in human nature. There is no need to go into detail—a general glance will satisfy the present purpose.

Fetichism and Animism.

When we do this, we learn that the first stirrings of religion displayed themselves through the emotions of fear and hope—fear of nature's terrors and hope of her favors. Early man, like later man, heard just what his capacities enabled him to hear; and was filled with fear or quickened

by hope according to what he heard or saw. What he heard or saw seemed to him more of a demon than a god and he pitifully strove to propitiate it with simple bribes and prayers. Shakespeare has given us a picture of that state of mind in Calaban of the "Tempest." It was when the storm broke over him in thunder and lightning that Calaban cowered and begged the mercy of his God, though his God was nothing more than a drunken sailor. We have an instinctive survival of this in man today. I have seen men of a high degree of intellectuality, who in their sane moments did not believe in a protecting providence, fall to their knees unconsciously in extremity and ask the help of whatever God there be. But there can be no prayer where there is no hope and we may be sure that hope or trust or faith in some elementary form inspired these childish petitions. That early phase is called by the learned "Fetichism." The childman saw that there was an overwhelming power in his little world and he tried to get it on his side—hence talismans and totems and the adoration of things. This was the dawn of religion. The dawn of the fetich-worshipper has become a greater light in our day, because our world has grown bigger; but we have not yet solved the riddle of our universe. We know more about the movements of the stars and the tides and the winds, but the power that controls and moves them to their unseen end is still the inscrutable mystery.

By and by the dawnlight of the fetich-worshiper grew into a clearer ray, which with the learned we may call "Animism." From the worship of things early man ascended to the worship of spirits. He conceived of living spirits, peopling and animating woods and trees, streams and pools, and also his own body. To him the world was alive. Man was a haunted being. Everywhere were ghosts and spirits and demons and fairies and goblins. All these had to be wooed and won to be his helpers; hence arose sacrifices and sacraments, offerings of food and wine and blood. Then gradually came the perception of order in nature and a rude notion of moral obligation; in plain words, of duty. That was the dawn of science and ethics. We have traveled immeasurably beyond the savage's glimmerings of law in nature and order in society. The dawnlight has grown in brightness, but it is not yet noon. Innumerable troops of old gods have disappeared into the limbo of the past, new gods have appeared upon the scene and cast their splendors on the pathway; but we know that the Power which is the cause and urge of all things is still the great mystery, hidden in the light beyond.

Polytheism and Monotheism.

But let us trace the human course a little farther down the dim corridors of time. Gradually the little gods of Animism passed into the twilight and the more imposing deities of Polytheism rose above the horizon. Becoming conscious of his own personality, man attributed personality to his objects of worship, and embodied in them his highest ideas of virtue. Thus arose the twelve major deities and the countless minor divinities of the pagan world. And in the meantime man had been developing eyes for the beautiful in the universe. The mysterious power was seen to break out into beauty, and the visible order of things made itself heard as harmony. Man began to realize a grandeur in the rising and setting of the sun, a music in the murmur of the trees, even a delight in the perfume of the violet. Beauty was born and embodied in the gods. This was the dawn of aesthetics. Let the modern man take all the credit he deserves for his share in the vast process of the ages; but let him also cherish the modest truth that the dawnlight of aesthetics flashed into being long before his day. And let him be as willing to submit his idols to the judgment of the great God as he is willing to see the idols of the past disappear before his own. Eternal beauty is ever on before.

During the next stage of development, we see the long procession of the older gods vanishing into the twilight and the dark, just as we may watch the figures sliding off the white sheet of a magic lantern. One by one they pass, nay, in groups, in crowds, in huddling and hurrying droves, they vanish into the limbo of forgetfulness—those idols of the youth of man. For at a certain advanced stage a particular deity was selected as being of superior power and helpfulness, and the conception of one all-including power gradually dispelled the conception of a number of jostling and competing powers. Heaven was thought also to have order and harmony similar to earth, and the symbol of heaven's harmony and beauty was one god. Thus was Monotheism born, one of the greatest advances ever achieved by the human race. With that conception of the unity of God the great idea of justice came to full circle in the moral nature of man. Man came to believe that the universal power held the scales of the universe, and wielded its sword. But though to modern man has been bequeathed the conception of justice, it remains so crude, so barbarous, so mixed with cruelty, that his so-called just god is seen to be merely an idol of a larger growth, who must also pass into the twilight as the dawn of religion passes on to noon.

The Knowledge of God Progressive.

Let that glance through the avenue of the past suffice. It is enough to show that "No one is against God but God himself," that is, no one is against the imagined god but the real God itself. It is the real God that successively pushes away the idols erected in its name by the generations of mankind. It is the real God, whatever that may be, that transfuses the mind and spirit of man with intelligence and knowledge, and thus brings the successive ages to perceive the vanity of their idols, to discard them for higher forms, which in turn prove to be idols too. And so for the ages to come it will be as it has been in the past, in order that mankind may never rest in the contemplation of anything that is elusive; but may pass forever on his brightening way towards infinite perfection. "No one is against God but God himself." Shelley's imagery is as accurate as it is sublime:

> "The one remains, the many change and pass;
> Heaven's light forever shines; earth's shadows fly."

If our telescopic view of the distant past has convinced us that no one is against God, no one has ever been or can ever be against God, but God itself, we shall then realize the commonplace truth that man's knowledge of the Great Reality is progressive. His knowledge of God, to use this word, keeps pace with his other knowledge. Thus there is no finality in what used to be called "revelation," but which I prefer to call "discovery," regarding it as the response of the universe to man's inquiring mind. And in these last years the accumulation of knowledge has been so vast and rapid that the material for higher and truer conceptions of Deity is embarrassing in its riches. One could reel off a dozen sciences which have supplied material for a truer vision of the universe and of man, and more satisfying conceptions of the divine. Astronomy, geology, paleantology, ethnology, history, psychology, are among the prophets and teachers which have multiplied the facts, widened the horizon, and given boundless satisfaction not only to the curious head, but to the hungry heart of man. Increase of knowledge in those luxuriant fields has brought increase of knowledge of the universe and its ways with man, a truer view of its operations, and therefore better conceptions of God.

Revelation or Discovery?

From man's invasion of the unknown during these last two generations we have seen him return enriched with spoil from a thousand fields, all of which have still further enriched his thought of God and his knowledge of his relation to the Great Reality. It is now high time to substitute

the scientific word "discovery" for the theological word "revelation." The word revelation is a survival of the old supernaturalism which imagined a gap between God and nature and bridged it by means of miracle. The same gap was supposed to intervene, also between God and man, being bridged in that case by special revelation. Miracle and revelation are correlative terms, the first having reference to God in nature, the second to God in man, and they equally imply supernatural intervention. What theology called revelation as if it were a special and miraculous unfolding of deity, science calls discovery, knowing it to be the result of the enquiring mind of man; for there is no creator that makes exceptional and miraculous displays of his will any more than of his power. Man is placed in this spacious and wonderful universe, endowed with curiosity and intelligence, and expected to explore and learn about it. And thus religious truth is discovered just the same as any other kind. The only difference is that the moral sense may play a greater part in the one case, while the mental faculties play the greater part in the other. These two faculties mingle in every intelligent act—the proportions may differ, the accent may be differently placed, but that is all.

Let Us Have Freedom.

Such a discourse as this cannot conclude therefore without pointing out that the indispensable condition of a higher knowledge of God and the universe is freedom—intellectual, social, political and spiritual freedom. Which of us would not see life sweet, wholesome, and free? Then let us know that we can fulfill our desire only in proportion as men become free—free inwardly and free outwardly. Let us not be afraid that religion will pass away with the older gods. Let us not be afraid to smash the gods which after all are only idols. Let us not be afraid of free thought. Free thought will not lead men away from, but onward toward, religion. Authority makes atheists and hypocrites. Freedom makes believers and true men. With freedom in all its kingdoms, mankind will advance rapidly along those avenues of aspiration and endeavor which end in nobler temples and worthier deities.

Said the mystic, William Blake: "There is no God unless man can become God." In like manner we may say there is no man unless the child can become a man. But just as the child in order to become a man must abstain from poisons and rise superior to disease, so man, if he is to approach nearer the infinite which we call God, must overcome mental dullness and spiritual indolence; must be neither slave nor tyrant, but be free man, in mind and soul and consciousness. As time goes on I believe we shall

more and more enthrone deity in the human breast, whereas the ancients enthroned it above the stars. Perhaps in the last solution, we shall think of God as the root of all in accordance with theism, and yet as the flower of all in accordance with pantheism.

What's in a Name?

With such a conception of God names and symbols are relatively unimportant. Names and titles can bear little relation to the Infinite—the Infinite which Tennyson addressed as "The nameless of the hundred names." If some choose to call the Infinite "Nature," what of it? If others choose to call it "Reason," what if it? If others "Love," what of it—or others "Order," what of it? The Infinite is all that and more. Make the human vocabulary as rich and broad as you may, it is still inadequate. All the ninety-nine names of Allah in the Moslem ritual are insufficient to set forth "The nameless of a hundred names." Spell "God" your own way, I care not, and no doubt he cares less. Let each one describe in his own tongue the wonderful ways of the eternal. What's in a name? As Professor Carruth says:

A fire-mist and a planet,
  A crystal and a cell,
A jelly-fish and a saurian,
  And caves where the cave-men dwell;
Then a sense of law and beauty,
  And a face turned from the clod—
Some call it Evolution,
  And others call it God.

A haze on the far horizon,
  The infinite tender sky,
The ripe, rich tint of the corn-fields,
  And the wild geese sailing high;
And all over upland and lowland
  The charm of the golden rod—
Some of us call it Autumn,
  And others call it God.

Like tides on a crescent sea-beach,
  When the moon is new and thin,
Into our hearts high yearnings
  Come welling and surging in;
Come from the mystic ocean,
  Whose rim no foot has trod—
Some of us call it Longing,
  And others call it God.

A picket frozen on duty,
  A mother starved for her brood,
Socrates drinking the hemlock,
  And Jesus on the rood;
And millions who, humble and nameless,
  The straight, hard pathway plod—
Some call it Consecration,
  And others call it God.

I take great encouragement from the thought that the twilight of the gods is caused by daylight in the minds and souls of men. As the religions of the twilight vanish into eternal shadow and sink into night, we turn to behold the religion of the dawn advancing with its face towards the east and the morning star upon its brow. That is the Free Religion which this church agitates amidst the clashing and competing elements of the modern crucible. Let us call no vain laments after the figures of the vanishing gods. Let us turn and hail the religion of the dawn.